New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1947

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1947 PRODUCTIONS

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"THE BEST PLAYS," 1946-47

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"All My Sons"
"The Iceman Cometh"
"Joan of Lorraine"
"Another Part of the Forest"
"Years Ago"
"John Loves Mary"
"The Fatal Weakness"
"Christopher Blake"
"The Story of Mary Surratt"
"Brigadoon"

THEATRE OPENINGS

"Laura"

Theatre Critics Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Laura"

PM

JUNE 29, 1947

Kronenberger

'Laura' on Broadway Gains No New Laurels

Like its sister thriller *Rebecca*, but like few things else, *Laura* was a movie before it was a play. A very good movie, too, by all accounts—for by some mischance I never got round to seeing it. But my not having seen it on the screen is, in a small way, a break for *Laura* on the stage. I don't mean that I found *Laura* effective on the stage; I didn't. But if ignorance was very far from bliss at the Cort Thursday night, it was a shield, at times, against boredom. By not knowing the story, by not being hep to the murderer, I got a good moment here and there, as well as the opportunity to guess throughout.

* * *

But guessing away is not much fun if you're never really made to give a damn; and a few thrills flanked by an unconscionable amount of talk don't make for much of an evening. It is this talkiness, along with a good deal of uninspired acting, that I think harms the show most. There is—as nearly everybody must know—an ingenious idea in *Laura*, and the script is a professional enough one. But except for the moments that are sure-fire, nothing takes fire at all. And with few exceptions, the characters do not even take form.

The Laura of K. T. Stevens is physically attractive enough, but personally unconvincing. As Laura's heel of a Southern fiancé, Tom Rutherford registers only faintly. As the detective, Hugh Marlowe registers more strongly, but only in a very routine way. In the play's showiest role—as the elegant and decadent Lydecker—Otto Kruger is giving the play's smoothest performance, and one that in terms of pure acting is much better than it seems to be. Unfortunately the part is a good deal more sophisticated in intention than it is in effect. The authors seem to think that any succession of polysyllables, if purred or fluted, will sound on the stage like an epigram. But it only sounds like fustian, and it only makes Lydecker rather dull.

What *Laura* may have needed, in fact, was less sophistication and more good old vulgar snap. Stewart Chaney's set, in any case, is a good one.

—Louis Kronenberger

The New York Times

JUNE 27, 1947

Otto Kruger Gives a Masterly Performance in the Theatre Version of 'Laura' by Vera Caspary and George Sklar

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since murder mysteries have been more superfluous than usual this season, "Laura," which was put on at the Cort last evening, deserves a nod or two on a comparative basis. For Otto Kruger is giving a most accomplished performance in a part that a mediocre actor would make unbearable. And as a piece of dramatic construction this gum-shoe romance by Vera Caspary and George Sklar is a couple of cuts better than most.

The play is based on Miss Caspary's novel, which has already yielded a film. Under Clarence Derwent's direction, the play is intelligently staged inside a stunning apartment setting by Stewart Chaney.

* * *

No doubt it is only logical to expect the characters in a murder play to be less lovable than, for example, the ladies and gentlemen of the audience. But the characters in "Laura" seem to this playgoer to be the chief impediment to a really good evening in the theater.

Somebody has murdered somebody in Laura Hunt's apartment under the impression that Laura was the victim. Since she turns up later, looking particularly radiant, the murder was certainly ill-advised, though the police still insist upon finding the felon.

In a murder play it is always pleasant to hope that at least one character is innocent and is going to get free. Although everyone in "Laura" fascinates everyone else, none of them is attractive on the other side of the footlights. Laura is an egotist who loves a morose cad and is loved by a dapper egomaniac. The police department supplies a personable detective, but he eliminates himself from good companionship by falling in love with Laura. None of them seems worth a whole evening in the theatre, despite the ingenious plot in which the authors have ensnared them.

* * *

Although K. T. Stevens has beautiful hair and considerable personality, she is a coltish actress who lacks poise; and the Laura she is acting is less ravishing than had been hoped for. Hugh Marlowe is giving a conspicuously good performance as the educated detective. As the cad with a set of loose ethics Tom Rutherfurd is also doing well.

But Mr. Kruger is the evening's gentleman of distinction. He is playing the part of an over-civilized writer who speaks in rounded sentences with inflections of malice and superiority. They would sound atrocious on the lips of a mediocre actor. But Mr. Kruger has coordinated the literary style of the part with the human style of an elegant of the world—spacing the words and strutting the part simultaneously. No matter what a play may be like, it is always a pleasure to watch a master of the craft of acting.

'LAURA.'

Play by Vera Caspary and George Sklar based on the novel by Miss Caspary; staged by Clarence Derwent; setting by Stewart Chaney; costumes by Robert Lanza; presented by H. Clay Blaney in association with S. P. and Roy Steckler at the Cort Theater Thursday evening, June 26, 1947. The cast:

Mark McPherson	Hugh Marlowe
Danny Dorgan	Tom Walsh
Waldo Lydecker	Otto Kruger
Shelby Carpenter	Tom Rutherfurd
Bessie Clary	Grania O'Malley
Mrs. Dorgan	Kay MacDonald
A Girl	K. T. Stevens
Olsen	Walter Riemer

SYNOPSIS: The setting is the living-room of Laura Hunt's apartment in New York City. Act I. An evening in August. Act II. The next morning. Act III. That night.

New York Herald Tribune

JUNE 27, 1947

By HOWARD BARNES

Stage "Laura" Slips

VERA CASPARY'S novel "Laura," already made into a taut screen melodrama, has emerged on the stage with far less vibrancy. Granted that the material of the book lent itself more felicitously to motion picture treatment, the fact remains that the Cort Theater production is sadly wanting. Miss Caspary and George Sklar have been bemused by verbiage in their dramatization, when they should have been concentrating on action, mood and suspense. Otto Kruger, K. T. Stevens and Hugh Marlowe posture properly in the small web of circumstances which finds a supposed corpse being suspected of murder, but there is little personal or melodramatic conviction in their performances. Hollywood is definitely one up on this parallel project.

* * *

Curiously enough, the setting in the theater makes the film backgrounds pale by comparison. Stewart Chaney has devised a handsome and cunning apartment interior, with a huge window overlooking midtown Manhattan and a mammoth portiere which serves as an excellent prop for the few moments of excitement you will find at the Cort. Aside from these physical blandishments "Laura" is far from stimulating. Perhaps it is unfair to catalogue the current exhibit on the basis of the resounding film success which preceded it, but movies made out of plays are invariably appraised in the same manner.

* * *

Irrespective of the screen show, this summer theater offering is dreary. The infatuation of a handsome detective for a supposedly dead lady is never believably established at the Cort. The menace of an ever-present killer, who tries to rectify his first mistake of blasting a friend of the heroine, never accumulates the burden of terror that is necessary to carry the work through three acts. There is a lot of talk in "Laura", which one of the principals refers to as epigrammatic eloquence, but it does little to fortify a languid murder melodrama.

* * *

Kruger, in the role which Clifton Webb made comparatively memorable on the screen, falls rather badly in creating a suavely sinister character. He veers between flippancies and bursts of psychopathic violence, unfortunately leaving the fellow neither attractive nor evil. Miss Stevens tries hard to be glamorous as the girl of the title, but she scarcely makes it plausible that a flatfoot would fall in love with her portrait and then champion her after she has materialized from the dead. Marlowe does the steadiest job of acting as the detective, and Tom Rutherford has some good bits as a cad. "Laura" was a good picture. It has been made into a sorry play.

DAILY NEWS

JUNE 27, 1947

'Laura' Only Serves to Remind Us That the Films Did It Much Better

By ROBERT SYLVESTER

There are two basic reasons why the stage play called "Laura" should never have been done. In the first place, it isn't very good. In the second place it just goes to prove, once again and rather painfully, that the movies can do movie stories better than the stage can.

As a film, "Laura" was one of the few adult and intelligent screen murders, and Hollywood's handling of same was in its best technical and box office style. It made a star of Clifton Webb. It helped Vincent Price and Dana Andrews to other good roles. It even managed to give the illusion that Gene Tierney can act.

Stage Show Stumbles.

The stage exhibit, which opened at the Cort last night, is fashioned from the same Vera Caspary original, and Miss Caspary did the dramatization in partnership with George Sklar, a playwright of experience. Somehow, the stage version should have been better than it is. Especially since this is the second time it's been cast and produced.

Alas, 'ts otherwise. The fluid suspense of the film version stumbles and entangles itself. Otto Kruger at times seems to be doing a sort of burlesque of Webb, grimacing and jerkily sliding in and out of character. As the detective, a fine characterization in the film, Hugh Marlowe declaims, tosses his head, and sounds as if he were still doing Ellery Queen on the radio. The lines he has to speak don't make him sound much brighter than Ellery, either.

Poor Acting, Staging.

Where the film had a rather haunting and very melodic popular song as a well-worked background, the company at the Cort pounds around on a Stewart Chaney set which echoes hollowly. They run hither and thither, gabbling as they run, and if they have anything important to say it's an even bet you won't hear it. There is also some of the worst acting of the season and Clarence Derwent has staged the piece as though he expected it to play a week in a barn theatre.

The title role is played by K. T. Stevens, a startlingly attractive girl who wears a series of sensational hairdos. Miss Stevens has a nice crisp manner and her voice, while a little thin, is pleasant and interesting. Last night Miss Stevens also had on a little too much chest harness. It must have been a harness. If it wasn't—hot damn!

Journal American

JUNE 27, 1947

Hollywood Refugee Collapses in New York

By ROBERT GARLAND

Following a couple of sick spells along the road, "Laura" limped into town last night and collapsed on the stage of the Cort Theatre. It would, I think, have been better for all concerned if the sickly refugee from Hollywood had stood out West in bed.

This George Sklar dramatization of a Vera Caspary novel had long been languishing on the outskirts. But nobody, not even Hunt Stromberg Jr., saw fit to bring it onto Broadway. Not until last night, when it was assisted into W. 48th st.

The assisters were H. Clay Blaney, a tested showman, and the S. P. and Roy P. Steckler, of whom I have not heard. They were real kind to "Laura," believe me, doing what they could to make the Hollywooden runagate feel healthfully at home.

But the runagate passed out on them. In two dimensions, on a screen, "Laura" may have been alive and ticking. I, no moviegoer, would not know. But I do know that, in three dimensions, on a stage, "Laura" was nothing of the kind...

Only a necrophite would urge otherwise.

• • •

Dead at the Curtain

As a character—to say nothing about her as a play—Laura was dead when the curtain rose last evening. Somebody had bumped her off, you heard. Her maid, a wishful thinker, identified her body as it lay faceless on the floor.

Poor Laura Hunt was dead! And her ashes were planted in the ground. But her portrait, by J. Campbell Phillips, hung on the wall, while her lovers, Mrs. Dorgan's Danny, Mrs. Carpenter's Shelby and Mrs. McPherson's Mark, hung all around.

Then, from the night and out of an off-stage thunderstorm, Laura Hunt appeared in the flesh and a pair of slacks run up by Pattulo Modes, Incorporated. Her murder, you were told, had been exaggerated. The cremated cadaver was nothing about which to worry.

It was only a girl friend whose name escaped me. But name or no name, Laura had been devoted to her. So devoted that before lending the nameless one her penthouse for the weekend, she had hit her on the head with a silver of hors d'ouevres...

Laura Hunt was suspect as a lady killer.

• • •

Irky Character

Frankly, I did not think she was. But, with equal frankness, I was not certain who the killer would turn out to be, although I hoped it would be the Waldo Lydecker played by Otto Kruger on-stage and by Clifton Webb on-screen.

An irkier character no stage—not even the Cort's when "Heads or Tails" was there—had ever seen. And Mr. Kruger did little to ease its irksomeness. Hugh Marlowe, as Mrs. McPherson's Mark, played cops and lovers as he was told.

K (period) T (period) Stevens was programmed as A Girl. But she turned out to be the murdered Laura who, pulling herself together with post-mortem determination, was accused of bumping off her girl friend. There were five others, and a bottle of Old Taylor.

Mr. Blaney, in association with the Messrs. Steckler, salvaged a solid setting by Stewart Chaney. Against it, Clarence Derwent solidly directed. But the one bright boy in the whole "Laura" set-up was young Hunt Stromberg. He left it gasping on the road...

Twentieth Century-Fox, "Laura" still belongs to you!

Daily Mirror

JUNE 27, 1947

'Laura' Is Tepid As A Stage Play

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Once an author has sold a story to the movies, he or she would do well to forget the stage. Dramatizations of stories that have been filmed seldom, if ever, catch the public's fancy.

The most recent effort to sell playgoers a domestic version of a Hollywood success is "Laura," which H. Clay Blaney, in association with S. P. and Roy P. Steckler, brought to the Cort Theatre last evening.

It is by Vera Caspary and George Sklar and based on a melodrama which the former sold to the movies for a handsome sum before thinking of Broadway possibilities. Those who have seen both stage and screen versions cannot but develop an admiration of Hollywood's craftsmen.

The film was a lulu. The stage play is a tepid and often implausible whodunit. Its characters are an incredible lot: A gal of easy virtue who's a whiz as a huckster, an effete and decadent writer, a professional Southerner out of an 1870 melodrama, a timid professor posing as a hardboiled detective, a brassy jive music student with a yen for jazz and a couple of stock Irishwomen.

Suspense was a missing quantity at the Cort last night. At least 90 percent of the customers had read the book or seen the film. They knew the answers and got the willies sitting around till the villain was brought to justice.

Had an enterprising film firm had a clocker at the Cort, it might have been surprised to learn just how many of the first nighters were movie fans. But they may have known the facts of fiction life already.

Otto Kruger, Hugh Marlowe, Tom Rutherford and K. T. Stevens give pedestrian performances in the lead under the direction of Clarence Derwent. They are all excellent troupers, but victims in this instance of material to tax the talents of the capable.

Derwent, president of Actors' Equity, is an old and experienced hand at provoking chills, but he needs a better script than his current one to turn the trick, particularly during a warm and humid spell.

Stewart Chaney has designed just such an apartment for the scene of the crime as any harried burgher would pay a premium to possess.

A star-studded cast tried to sell "Rebecca" here a couple of seasons ago—without success—after it had reached the screen. We do not think the valiants in "Laura" will have better luck. Only an actress with the vitality and authority of Tallulah Bankhead could do much for the Cort's new tenant and we doubt the authors would consider her the type.

K. T. Stevens is pretty, shapely and soft. She's appealing, but lacks the electric spark to ignite the Caspary-Sklar puzzle play into a click.

New York World-Telegram

JUNE 27, 1947

'Laura' as Stage Play Falls Short of Film

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Last night's live production of the living-or-dead "Laura" proved, if little else, some interesting points about the relationship of theater and moving picture material.

Vera Caspary's book made an ingenious film, elusive but haunting, bitter but heart-rending. As a play it is shallow, artificial and utterly without quality.

It must be admitted that every element of the film was first rate, while the play version is for the most part indifferently acted and awkwardly written. But the contrast is even deeper than that.

A Fatal Female.

"Laura" is an ingenious story based on the premise that the heroine is fatally attractive to all kinds of men, from a janitor's boy through a detective to an effete dilettante. The camera could close in on Gene Tierney's immobile and exotic beauty to suggest this with conviction. K. T. Stevens is a fresh young lovely with a Varga girl figure. She is breezy but cozy, and as she moves around her fancy living room it is impossible to believe she would ever get mixed up in neurotic proceedings like those of the play.

She is presumed to be murdered, and the camera glanced lightly at many of her associates and knit together a fascinating reputation for her in death. In the play a few speeches must suffice, and she must be revealed as alive quickly or the plot would go to pieces.

The strange story of the detective falling in love with a dead girl was exquisitely detailed on the screen, but with the theater's static perspective it can only be suggested, mentioned and presumed.

Moods Mechanical.

There was a crescendo mood of terror as the film built to a solution of the wrong victim's murder, which in the play is mechanical and impersonal by comparison.

Nothing gives a picture more emotional suspense than eerie music, even if the camera is viewing an inanimate object or an utterly blank face. The stage has no such stimulant, and a play like "Laura" asks far too much contribution from the audience.

Granted that the picture was superbly done, and the play's execution is less than ordinary, the case of "Laura" suggests that tales of suspense and mystery are likely to be luckier in the mosaic form of the lenses.

Otto Kruger, as the collector of artistic objects, is deft with his scornful comments, and convincing in the role he plays in Laura's life. He is less caustic and sinister than Clifton Webb was in the pictured version of the role, but more human.

Detective Goes High Hat.

Hugh Marlowe is stalwart, if neither very penetrating nor sensitive as the detective. As an expursuer of hoodlums he seems somewhat drawing room bound, especially when he calls a receptacle for flowers a vahz.

As Laura's fiance, Tom Rutherfurd is even more guiltily intense than befits the contemptible bounder he plays.

Tom Walsh brings a fresh personality and authority to his local debut, as the jazz addicted son of the janitor.

The production is lighted so that only the face of a West Point plebe being hazed would be visible. The actors speak out of murky heads with an air of mystery as great as that surrounding the purpose of this production.